

INTERVIEW – LARRY COLBURN: WHY MY LAI, HUGH THOMPSON MATTER

By ***Vietnam Magazine***

When atrocities like the My Lai massacre are committed and covered up, it degrades us all.

Larry Colburn was a door gunner with crew chief Glenn Andreotta and Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson as pilot of a small scout helicopter during a combat assault at the village of My Lai on March 16, 1968. As murderous bloodlust unfolded on the ground below, Thompson and crew confronted fellow GIs to save numerous civilians from the fate of some 500 others that morning. Andreotta died in action a few weeks later, but Thompson and Colburn were key witnesses in the investigations and trials to follow. In this exclusive interview with Vietnam magazine and VietMag.com, Larry Colburn talks about his late friend Hugh Thompson, the My Lai massacre, the subsequent cover up, investigations and trials, his journeys back to Vietnam and meetings with survivors and the Hugh Thompson Foundation, which he formed after Thompson's death in 2006.

What led you to enlist in the Army?

I was raised with a sense of duty. My father landed on Normandy Beach and as a kid I watched the television series *Victory at Sea* and went to bed praying never to have to face the fire like those men on Normandy. I was 17 when I enlisted in 1966 with some friends. I had an administrative MOS and was ordered to Hawaii where I was working as a courier. They were taking volunteers for the 11th Brigade. I figured, I was in the Army, so I should experience it where the action was.

How did you get to the 123rd Aviation Battalion?

When I got to Vietnam I was attached to a headquarters company. Friends I had on the division level told me they were taking volunteers for the 123rd Aviation Battalion. The alternative was to be in an infantry unit, and I was told it would be a good idea to attach to an aviation company, better odds there. I would be there from December '67 to December '68.

You started out on an OH-23 scout helicopter?

When I first joined the company, the commander took the volunteers to the flight line and showed us bullet holes in the aircraft and asked us if we knew what they were. He wanted to give us some idea of what were getting into. You felt pretty vulnerable in that

little helicopter. Our main job was to fly close to the deck, entice fire to get the enemy to give up their position, mark it, suppress fire and get out of the gunships' way. Like most 18-year-old males I was naïve, had no idea what risks were. As I understand, that part of brain doesn't develop until 25.

When did you meet Hugh Thompson?

One morning as I was prepping an aircraft for a mission, he came down and introduced himself. He had a great rapport with enlisted men, as he had been one himself. "Don't salute me or call me sir," he said, "Just Mr. Thompson." He didn't believe in that "no fraternization" stuff, he was really one of the fellows, he knew both sides. And he was a character, a real joker.

Did you fly with him much before My Lai?

I flew with him dozens of times and saw sporadic action. We had different missions. For a while we were going out on snatch missions, where we'd basically kidnap draft-age males and take them in for interrogations. We also did a lot of recon missions and flying into free-fire zones to find enemy positions. Sometimes we did and sometimes we didn't.

On March 16, 1968, did you have any expectations of serious action?

The pilots were briefed, if the crew was briefed it was by the pilot in the aircraft on the way to the area. That morning, Hugh said, "This is supposed to be a VC stronghold, but you know G2." Usually, when intelligence said an area was hot, it wasn't, and visa versa. Hugh was being jovial. With Hugh, usually the more tense the situation, the more comical he would be.

Did you have any knowledge of who was being inserted into My Lai that morning?

No, we had no knowledge of who they were, we just knew they were Americans on the ground and we would have done anything for them. We would have died for them. We were very protective of the men on the ground.

What did you see when first flying over My Lai?

We came in from altitude down to low level. That morning was clear and as we came over a hilltop we saw a suspect in uniform with a pack, carrying a carbine in the middle of a rice paddy. He looked up and saw us and then took off for the tree line. Hugh said, "I'm going to take him on the right," which meant he was my target. I may have clipped him but he made it to the trees. That was the only enemy combatant we saw that day.

By this time, Lt. William Calley's Charlie Company was reaching My Lai?

Yes, and we were checking the perimeter as they were coming in and starting the combat assault. As we got back on station, we saw a lot of villagers leaving and figured that we may have dropped leaflets or had fired some artillery in morning. Then again, it was a Saturday morning and they were possibly going to market. It was women, children and elders we saw. They were not running, but just slowly moving out of the village. We thought that was good, that they would be out of the way. So we continued our recon.

When did you see those particular villagers again?

In about 10-15 minutes we were back to the same spot where we saw the villagers on the road leaving. Now we saw them again, but they were all lying on the road, dead or dying. We knew something seemed wrong. These people appeared to be no threat at all, and we couldn't figure out why they were fired on and killed as they were leaving the area.

Were you talking about this at the time?

Hugh was running scenarios through his head to figure it out. They couldn't have been killed by artillery. It couldn't be gunships, they weren't firing on people. Hugh alerted the low gunship as to what we had seen on the ground. The only radio communication we had was with the low gunship. They could communicate with the command craft that was flying at altitude. As we flew around more, we started seeing small groups of people dead or dying in other parts of the village.

You had no radio contact with the men on the ground?

We had no direct radio contact with the men on the ground. We were the closest and should have been able to communicate, but that's the way it was structured. If we would have had direct contact, we could have told them that these people are unarmed, no threat. Possibly we could have stopped things earlier.

You still didn't understand what was actually happening?

No. We even started marking the wounded with smoke, thinking the men on ground would come assist them. When we would come back to those we marked, we'd find they were now dead. We came to think we were indirectly killing these people ourselves by marking them with smoke. We couldn't come up with an explanation until Hugh marked a woman we saw who had a chest wound and decided to just move back in a hover when we saw a squad coming near. As we watched from about 15 feet off the ground, back maybe 20 meters, we saw this captain approach the woman, look down at her, kick her, step back and then blow her away. It all crystallized in that moment. In unison, all three of us shouted, "You son of a bitch!" That was Captain Ernest Medina.

That was a point of no return for Thompson?

When Hugh realized it was our people doing this killing, he knew he had to take drastic measures. We came across a ditch, with probably 150 or more people in it and the wounded trying to crawl out. There was a sergeant standing by the ditch by himself. Hugh landed and ran over and told the sergeant, "These are civilians, we got to help them out." The sergeant agreed, telling Hugh he'd help them—"out of their misery." Hugh continued to argue, said they were no threat, they had no weapons. Finally, when the sergeant said OK, Hugh thought he'd convinced him and got back in the helicopter and we pulled out. As we did, we heard automatic weapon fire. Glenn shouted, "He's firing into the ditch again!"

How did Hugh react when reason failed?

Hugh was furious, ready to do anything to save these innocent people. Just then Glenn spotted some people in an earthen bunker, saw faces peering out of the entry. We

surveyed around the bunker and saw that squad approaching. Hugh said: "These people are going to die. I'm not going to let this happen, we've got to do something. Are you guys with me?"

Any hesitation?

None. Glenn said, "If we are going to do something, we better do it right now!" So Hugh lands right between the approaching squad and the bunker. He left the aircraft in flight idle, as rotor blades can be somewhat intimidating. He also wanted to be able to get out quickly if need be. As Hugh jumped out, he told us to take our weapons down off the bungee cords and take some belted ammo and backup weapons and set up a little perimeter around the aircraft. He walked about 50 meters and encountered the lieutenant who was leading the squad. He tried to explain that these people appeared to be civilians, that we hadn't taken any fire and there was no evidence of combatants in that area. The lieutenant told him to mind his own business and get out of the way. They were face to face, screaming at each other. Hugh came back to the aircraft and because we had flight helmets on and the aircraft was running, we had to literally put our heads together as Hugh shouted instructions. He said: "They are coming this way. I'm going to go over to the bunker myself and get these people out. If they fire on these people, or fire on me while I'm doing that, shoot 'em!" Now Hugh really had no idea who or what was in that bunker, could have been an AK47 waiting for him there. But he didn't even draw a sidearm as he walked up to the bunker and motioned to the people to come out. Somehow they trusted him and they came out. He kept the aircraft and himself in between these people and the squad. We had thought there were two or three, but there were about 10 in the bunker. At that point, Hugh realizes he's got an aircraft that won't accommodate them. So he called our low gunship, piloted by a friend of his, Dan Millans, and said: "Danny, I need a favor. I want you to come down here and shuttle these people out of here." And that's what happened, but at that he had to make two trips. The high gun stayed in the air and circled.

Did the gunship crews know what was happening on the ground before this?

The low gun probably did because they had visual and were communicating with Hugh, and Hugh had been telling them what we'd been seeing, hoping they were relating that up to the command craft that was flying above at altitude.

How many men were in squad and were they threatening?

There were probably 10 in the squad. They approached but because the aircraft was at flight idle they tended to stay back a little. I know it's great copy, but I've tried to correct the record many times: No one pointed any weapons at anybody. When Hugh gave his order, I distinctly remember pointing my weapon directly down at the ground, so there was no question. Glenn and I were staring them down and watching to see how it would unfold. I remember catching one of the soldiers' eyes and I waved to him and he waved back. I thought Hugh would pull it off, when I saw some pull their rucksacks off and leave it to the lieutenant to have it out with Hugh. Remember, this was later in the morning approaching noon, most of the killing had already been done.

Were you prepared to fire on the squad?

How could I ever be prepared for something like that? Would I have? I guess that's the \$64,000 question isn't it? I've mulled this over for years. I don't know, at the time I thought about creating a diversion, discharging my weapon in another direction. But I really didn't know what was going to happen or how to react. Now, if I had known then what I know now about some of the activity going on there, the rapes and barbarism.... But still, who do you shoot? I don't know who did what. I'm not judge, jury and executioner. I just thank God everybody kept their cool and no one made any quick moves.

Could you have just reported this and left, knowing you'd at least made an effort?

No, because the commander was on a different frequency. Hugh transmitted what he could to the low gun in hopes that it would get up to the commander and someone would make a decision to stop it. At some point they finally did call for a cease-fire, but by then it was too late.

After evacuating the people, you thought you could do more?

We went back to the ditch because we knew there were a lot of people there who could have been saved. Glenn had a visual on some sort of movement in the ditch, so Hugh landed, and Glenn and I got out. Glenn went down into the ditch and found the boy that he had seen moving and handed him up to me. We took him out of the area to a hospital and gave him to a nun. Hugh told her he probably didn't have any family left.

Did you consider bringing gunships to ferry out others from the ditch?

Except for the boy, it appeared the rest were already dead.

You found later that that wasn't true?

As the wounded tried to crawl out, they were fired on by someone who had been left there to do just that. However, I've spoken to survivors on different occasions who had been at the bottom of the pile. They waited until the sun went down and they crawled out of that ditch.

When did you make your report of what happened?

After we took the boy to Quang Nai, we went back to our base, and Hugh Thompson and I reported to Colonel Oran Henderson.

Do you think most people realize there was more than just the killing that was going on?

Probably not. In the Peers inquiry testimony, I believe there were 14 rapes that were reported. There was also testimony of absolute insanity. They killed everything. Some soldiers even jumped on the water buffalos, riding them around while trying to kill them with their bayonets. It was a case of bloodlust.

Had you ever seen anything even approaching this before?

It was an enemy tactic to blur the lines between combatants and noncombatants. I'd seen civilians get in the way and unfortunately lose their lives because of that. But to

see people herded up like so many animals, marched into a ditch and machine-gunned? No I'd never seen nor heard of anything like that before, except in World War II. Hugh told me that was what was going through his mind, he was thinking of Nazi Germany, people digging trenches, forced to march into those trenches, mass graves.

Thompson had a famous emotional outburst upon returning to base?

I think he broke his flight helmet, he threw it down so hard. He was saying: "I'll never fly again. This is not what I'm here for. This is not how this military organization supposed to conduct operations. I'll have no part of this, I'll tear these wings off and never fly again!" Fortunately, people calmed him down before he reported to Colonel Henderson. He didn't want to appear to be frantic; he wanted to be taken seriously by Henderson.

Thompson wanted you to also make a report?

When Hugh asked me to come with him and report what had happened, he said: "Just tell the truth. Exactly what you saw." Since we were sitting shoulder to shoulder, we saw virtually the very same things. I walked in and told Henderson we saw unnecessary killing of many civilians. He made some notes on a legal pad and excused me and I left. He showed no reaction at all.

Did you expect something would be done as a result?

Yes. It was in their hands. And the people guilty of committing war crimes should have been dealt with. At the same time, judging from Henderson's reaction—he seemed almost nonchalant, like it was just another day at the office. That same day, the cover up started.

Months later you were surprised with a medal for action at My Lai?

Out of the blue, our unit was called out onto the tarmac for an awards and decoration ceremony. I had no idea what it was about. I thought someone else was getting recognition for something. It was unusual, the only time it happened while I was there. All of a sudden I hear my name called, I had no advance knowledge, no idea what was happening until they pinned the Bronze Star with Valor on me. I read the citation and thought what? "In the middle of a firefight..." I was an E4, what was I to do? I said, "Thank you, sir," and went back to work. I didn't write Hugh up for anything and he said he didn't write me up. We didn't know what was happening. I believe Glenn got a Bronze Star too.

Was this part of the cover up?

It had to be. The conclusion Hugh and I came to was they were trying to keep us quiet by giving us a phony award. But that was not to be the case.

When did you start talking to investigators?

I was back at Ft. Hood and my CO called me in, said I had a phone call. It was Hugh and he told me that I would be getting orders to report to Washington. He told me not to say anything to anybody, and just tell the truth when I got there. When the orders came down, the CO called me into his office and demanded to know what they were for. I

looked at them and the first thing I saw was, “Reason: to conduct necessary military business.” So that’s all I would tell the CO. He started accusing me of being with CID. He said you’re a plant aren’t you. I said I’m not really at liberty to say. I enjoyed that.

At that point, no one had a clue beside you and Hugh?

No. Hugh told me to keep my mouth shut and I did. We didn’t talk about it. There was some chatter since most of the people at Ft. Hood were returnees, but no one really zeroed in on what was happening.

Did the word about what happened at My Lai get around?

Those on station knew something about it but not many saw it up close and personal except for the men on the ground and a couple of helicopter crews. We didn’t talk too much about it ourselves because we reported on it and we were, frankly, preoccupied with the next mission. Of course anyone thinking of making a career in the military probably pretended they never heard anything.

Did you experience retaliation for what you did that day, or for talking to Henderson?

No, but Hugh was sent on missions in his OH-23 with his back up another OH-23—no gunships—into Dragon Valley, where there was rocket activity. That seemed suicidal to me, going out with next to no backup or firepower. That’s when he crashed about five helicopters in five months. I did hear that the men on the ground were told to pretend like it never happened. Some were sent out into the field for 60-75 days straight, and they started getting the feeling somebody was trying to get rid of them.

After My Lai, did you feel traumatized or feel like you carried a huge burden?

At first, I just felt shock. To this day I can’t remember exactly about that day reporting to Henderson. I remember wearing the same fatigues and they were pretty much covered with blood stains from carrying the boy and being in that ditch. I think I may have been in shock to some extent. After the initial shock, I think some sort of a defensive mechanism kicked in.

What did you do after My Lai for the rest of your tour?

I wanted to survive and get home. I flew in the 23 as a gunner through that summer, then I asked about throwing my hat into ring for a gunship where there was a little more armor and security. I stayed on gunships for rest of my time in Vietnam.

Did you have a sense that what you had seen at My Lai was and isolated incident or did you suspect similar atrocities were happening elsewhere?

When you see something like that happen, with no negative repercussions, you begin to think perhaps this is the method of operation. I think Task Force Barker’s intent was to create panic and drive the enemy forces out of the area. There could be a reason for doing it, or there could have simply been a complete breakdown in leadership. When the officers take part in it, it just escalates things. When you see your lieutenant or captain initiate these things, some enlisted men on the ground are more likely to do the

same thing. But remember, at My Lai only about a third of the men participated in the massacre, but no one else tried to stop it.

Glenn Andreotta was killed just a few weeks after My Lai?

Yes. I was on the backup team that day and we went out to try to retrieve the bodies. Glenn took a .51-caliber in the head, he was dead before he hit the ground.

When you testified in Washington for the Army investigation led by General William Peers, did you feel they were after the real story?

I flew from Ft. Hood to give testimony in the basement war room of the Pentagon. I knew General Peers had gotten in touch with Hugh and took him back over to the scene of the crime. Hugh was the general's personal pilot. It was fresh enough that things hadn't changed much. He was very helpful to General Peers and it seemed like he wasn't just going through the motions, it was like he really wanted to know what happened. I felt that my testimony validated Hugh's, and that was why it was important.

So you were encouraged at that point?

I was encouraged in that there was an investigation going on and they were going after some people in a big way. I was hoping there would be justice, but what did it achieve? Everybody walked. All of the investigations led to nothing, Hugh and I felt like all three trials were just window dressing. Nobody would be held responsible.

Before the story broke, did you or Hugh consider going public with the story?

No. Particularly because of the Peers and the IG investigations, I thought there were people sincere about upholding the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

Did you know when the story was about to break?

I was back in Mount Vernon, outside Washington, and I got a call from my mother saying there were some people at the house who wanted to talk to me. She asked me what it was about, and I said I wasn't sure. I got there and I'll never forget my mother taking me into the kitchen and telling me if I didn't want to tell these people anything, I didn't have to. I don't know how they found me, but I gave a brief interview, and it appeared with the *Life* magazine photo spread in December 1969.

How did you feel about that?

I always thought the American people deserved to know what was going on and I just thought it was good the public got a color photo layout of what happened at My Lai.

You were a witness for the prosecution in the trials that followed?

By then I was a civilian and was trying to attend college on the GI Bill, but I kept getting subpoenas. I testified in the trials of Henderson, Medina and Calley. When they started convicting people, I thought, now this is how it should unfold. But, after going through the process and seeing the ultimate outcome, I wasn't really surprised, but I was disillusioned. The outcome of the trials was disgraceful, and Hugh and I saw that it was a sham. We'd done what we could. I lost faith in the whole military organization and wanted to put it all behind me.

You and Hugh had a pretty low profile during and after the trials?

We were told by the prosecuting attorneys to keep our mouths shut, and I didn't advertise the fact I was at My Lai.

How did you and Hugh reconcile what you knew happened with the outpouring of public support for Calley and his men?

When the American people responded as they did in defense of Calley, it was really hard, especially for Hugh. It was absurd, but you have to be willing to pay the price. Just because you tell the truth, it doesn't mean everything always come up roses. It was denial on the part of the public. Hell, I didn't want to believe it, either, but I had no choice because I saw it.

Does it worry you that it was, and remains, in our capacity to excuse or rationalize an atrocity like My Lai committed by Americans?

I think it is deception, and that remains constant today. If you are an American who thinks all of our foreign policy and actions over the years is as pure as the driven snow, well that is just not reality. It has turned me into a cynic philosopher. We are inundated with information but we are not very well informed. People should realize that when atrocities are committed like this and covered up, it degrades us all.

Were you vilified or the target of death threats the way Hugh Thompson was?

Since Hugh's death, I have become the recipient of some of the hate mail he used to get. I have come to understand him more now than I did when he was here. I now know why he wanted me to come with him to events. We've been accused of many things, of being traitors. It can be disturbing. But one of things the most infuriating is being called a whistleblower, as if we went and ratted someone out. That is completely false, there was no backstabbing going on—we were right in their face at My Lai, we were ready to confront those people then and there. And we did, the best we could.

You are not comfortable with being called a hero, either?

We never thought we were heroes. That is what other people say. I know who I am, I'm no hero, I was scared shitless most of the time. When it was all happening, the feeling I had was, if this is how I'm going to die, I'm OK with it. It was so blatantly wrong what they were doing, we had no choice, we had to do what we did.

What about those who didn't stand up to evil in their midst?

I've tried to put myself in their position, tried to empathize. What would I have done if I were a man on the ground? There was a guy at the ditch with Calley, shooting people not yet dead. He threw his weapon down and said he wasn't going to do it. Calley pointed his weapon at him and threatened him with a court-martial. This fella stood up and said: "Fuck you. Court-martial me," and he left his weapon and walked away. You've got to love this guy.

On a trip back to My Lai in 2008, Larry Colburn embraces Do Hoa, the boy he helped rescue from a ditch in 1968, and his family. (copyright Michael Pittman)



So, what do you make of Calley's "apology" last year?

Well, it wasn't really an apology, was it? He just lateraled the ball to Medina. I imagine he wants to get right with God; he's not a young guy anymore. Interestingly, there are those toying with the idea of inviting him to make the trip back to My Lai to ask for the people there for forgiveness. Every time I've been back there, the survivors ask me, "Why don't the men who committed the atrocities come back and ask for forgiveness so that we might forgive them." They're Buddhists you know, they can forgive, put it behind them and carry on. That's what they want to do.

You've been back a few times?

Hugh and I went in 1998 with *60 Minutes*, just after we were given the Soldiers Medal. You can imagine the emotions that surfaced. Hugh struggled, but you see the people who survived are still in the same village, doing what they do. It is amazing to see the strength of the human spirit. In 2001 we went back and were reunited with the boy in the ditch. I went back in 2008 for the 40th anniversary.

Did the boy have a recollection of March 16, 1968?

At the time, I figured he was 3 or 4 years old, he was tiny. But it turns out he was 8. He is still tiny, but he remembers everything. Hugh and I were skeptical in '01, so we asked him a lot of questions and he told us things only he could have known. He remembered Glenn picking him up, seeing me in the ditch. He remembered how Glenn would put him down and pick him back up as he checked on other victims in the ditch. Only he would have known that. And it turned out, after we dropped him off with the nun at the hospital, he didn't stay 24 hours. At 8 years old, he made his way about 10 miles through the jungle by himself to the village. He had to make sure his mother, brother and sister, killed in the ditch, were buried properly.

You saw him again in 2008?

When we first saw him in 2001, he said all he wanted was to get out of Ho Chi Minh City where he worked in a factory at low wages, and get back to village and find a wife. When I arrived at My Lai in 2008, no one knew where he was. They tried to make arrangements to get him there, but couldn't find him. Then, as I was in this crowd, I turned around and there he was—with his beautiful wife and new baby boy. It was like he dropped out of the sky. That's what keeps me going.

What drove you to create the Hugh Thompson Foundation?

I thought that from a historical perspective, something needed to be in place so that when I'm gone, what Hugh did at My Lai won't just fade into obscurity. People need to know who Hugh Thompson was, what he did and why he did it. We also want to carry on Hugh's passionate advocacy for all veterans, not just Vietnam vets. He retired as a VA counselor in Louisiana. He knew the importance of getting people who are struggling the attention they need so they can transition back into civilian life and deal with problems, be they physical or emotional.

And you want to instill the spirit of Thompson in others.

We want to recognize people in the military and all walks of life who really make difficult

decisions the way Hugh did. We are developing the concept of a Hugh Thompson Medallion to do that.

The My Lai story and Hugh Thompson's role in it is really important, but do you find most people are unaware of it?

Even though the military has admitted to the massacre, many people are not capable of acknowledging and processing that information. It is denial, a refusal to believe our young men could run amok the way they did. Likewise, what Hugh did has been ignored or glossed over in history texts, much the same way the incident has been.

You and Hugh had the opportunity to tell your stories to young military officers.

I have accompanied Hugh when he has spoken at West Point, the Naval and Air Force Academies, to the Red Cross, in Norway, Australia and elsewhere. He has had an impact on many young minds in the military. But I still don't think the topic really gets the exposure it really needs.

How do you think your story, of an event now long in the past, can make a difference?

Whenever I felt discouraged about things, Hugh would remind me that if we get through to just one person, it's worth it. That one person will go on to tell 10 other people. After Hugh died, I was invited to Annapolis to speak one more time. One of the instructors told me a story that he wished Hugh could hear. Two young infantrymen in Iraq came upon a situation where a number of civilians were questionable and the men weren't sure whether to engage or not. In the midst of it, they had a conversation like this: "Remember those old guys from Vietnam and what they told us back at Annapolis?"

Anyway, they remembered our story about My Lai, and instead of just lighting up a target, they took the time to analyze and study the situation. And it turned out it was a good thing that they did. Innocent people didn't die that day. They didn't just fly off the handle and engage a target that was borderline. If Hugh knew that, it would have made everything he went through worthwhile for him. He's saved lives again.

How do you intend to spread the word about the foundation?

I hope to take as many speaking engagements as I can. I have a few lined up at some universities this year. I'm giving interviews and working with students. We hope to link up with other organizations and grow some legs.

You must have had some post-traumatic stress after your experience in Vietnam.

I'm Irish so I'm to suffer. But I've had my episodes. You know, you think everybody feels you and you can ignore your own symptoms. I give credit to my sister Mary, who saw my condition when I came home. She enticed me to move to east Oregon, near a ski area. If there was anything that was cleansing for me that was it. I've had PTSD issues for 42 years.

Did you get help?

When I moved to the East Coast, I stopped at a VA hospital and had a list of things I

thought I should get out. I waited in the hospital waiting room for about four hours to see a psychologist. The best therapy I got was in those four hours and seeing the people who were so broken physically. When I finally got in to see the guy, he was a major, he wouldn't make eye contact as I read my list. I told him everything and he didn't know how to respond, he had no idea how to deal with it. He just said I was a prime candidate for PTSD. So he gave me prescriptions for several psychotropic drugs. Well, I took the prescriptions, ripped them up into little pieces and walked out.

You and Thompson must have been good mutual support.

We'd talk a lot and if I was stressing I could always pick up the phone and Hugh could always talk me down. He struggled too. When he had a heart attack he said he would slow down, but he didn't...

So, how did you guys feel when you got the Soldiers Medals in 1998?

Like the trials, it was forced. The military was forced after an eight-year letter writing campaign by David Egan, a professor at Clemson University, and a businessman named William Cavanaugh. They had been writing to the Pentagon for years about Hugh, totally unbeknownst to Hugh. They got some people to listen, and then there were others in the Pentagon trying to put it at the bottom of the stack. Ultimately, it was a public relations move, they had to give the medal. They didn't want to. At first, they only wanted to give it to Hugh at a private ceremony. Hugh said, "No, let's do it at the Wall." They said no, the weather might be bad or something. Hugh said that was OK, because that was the appropriate place. And Hugh said, "What about my crew?" They said they didn't have any intention for awards of the crew. "Well," Hugh told them, "if you just give it to me I'll take the medal, with a camera crew, to the first men's room I can find and I'll flush it down the toilet." This is a colonel he is talking to. "Oh, no, Mr. Thompson, let me see what we can do," he said. It went on like that for another year and half until finally they agreed to award medals to all of us.

Were you glad you got it?

If it's not sincere, it doesn't mean anything. It was a dime short and day late for Hugh, 30 years after the fact—after causing him grief—then they're going to call him a hero? I have mine put away somewhere, but I think Hugh threw his away one night.

Many fellow GIs still don't think you did the right thing?

There are those hardcore people who do still say we shouldn't have told the truth, that we should have covered for those guys in the field; that we didn't know what it was like on the ground. Sorry that's not what we did and I don't care what they think of me. We loved those guys in the field. Our purpose for being there was to protect them. If people have some confusion about that, that's their problem. It's like the line from the movie *No Country for Old Men* when the Vietnam veteran played by Josh Brolin, who responds to another guy who introduced himself and says he was "in 'Nam" too: "Oh, you were in Vietnam too. What's that make you, my buddy?" So, just because guys served in the same theater doesn't necessarily mean we are all that close.

Ever reflect about how you are part of an event of such historical significance?

I'll always know that we did was morally right, we did what we could to help people who could not defend themselves. I think that is probably what has helped me get through it all. As far as a place in history, that's not something I dwell on. I'm a garden-variety human being and that's all there is to it. I was always comfortable as the sidekick and enjoyed the time with Hugh. Now that the dynamics have changed with Hugh passing, I understand now how difficult it was for him, carrying it around in his gut, alone.

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